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ABSTRACT

Educators must create learning environments that are responsive to the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of adolescents. Today's adolescents need emotional and social guidance to cope with social pressures and personal identity confusion that naturally accompany adolescence. This generation of adolescents brings a different set of needs into the classrooms. Their experiences have been shaped and influenced by easy access and overexposure to technology and the media. While the classroom must be physically safe, adolescents additionally need a psychologically safe environment for learning. In classrooms characterized by relationship-building, positive interaction, and trust, adolescents can develop socially and emotionally. Experiences that help teach tolerance, empathy, civility, and moral development include perspective-taking, debate, role playing, decision making, discussion, and civic action projects. Personal reflection can be encouraged through journal writing. Community can be built through collaborative inquiry and technology-based projects that enable adolescents to connect to the world of experience beyond the classroom. The current ideas for fostering social and emotional support for adolescent learning can be grouped into several broad areas, including: personalize learning opportunities; build relationships; promote inner management; create emotional security; and teach well. (Contains 23 references.) (SM)

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# Making Classrooms "Safe" for Adolescent Learning

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**Making Classrooms "Safe" for Adolescent Learning**

The darker side of adolescence has become the topic of public conversation. Widely distributed journals have focused on the daily activities of adolescents in and out of the classroom. The teen culture has been targeted, and its music, language, fashion, and social habits have been scrutinized. Statistics have been reported on the quantity of drug and alcohol use, the frequency of sexual activity, the number of suicide attempts, and the prevalence of cheating. Other writers, however, have reported the adolescent generation as less violent, less self-destructive, and less socially misguided than many perceive (Males 1998). A key concern across the literature, however, has been that adolescents are not given the opportunity in classrooms to develop healthy social and emotional skills (Epstein 1998; Hine 1999).

The task before educators is to create a learning environment that is responsive to the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of adolescents. Teachers must find ways to connect with students on an individual level, to build interpersonal relationship within the classroom, and to promote a sense of emotional well-being. They also need to plan instructional experiences that are socially relevant, personally meaningful, and cognitively challenging. The goal of these experiences should be to engender personal competence, metacognitive efficacy, and ethical responsibility, and to more effectively prepare adolescents for the complexity and expectation for living in a global community. Teachers can prepare an instructional environment that is *safe* for adolescent social, personal, and cognitive development (Beamon 2000).

Undeniably, adolescence is a tumultuous time. Spanning the years between late childhood and young adulthood, it is a time of upheaval and change when a naïve sense of security gives way to self-consciousness and awkwardness. Adolescence is a time of pulling away, of testing limits, of exploring sexuality, of questioning identity, and of shifting

relationship. While the portrait of adolescence is a familiar one, the context, however, has changed. Adolescents today need more emotional and social guidance to cope with the social pressures and personal identity confusion that naturally accompany this transitional time in their lives (Cohen 1999).

The current generation of adolescents brings a different set of needs into the classroom and a different set of challenges for today's teachers. Their experiences have been shaped and continue to be influenced by easy access and over exposure. Technology and the media determine the way they acquire both information and attitude. It is not surprising that adolescents perceive many instructional tools outdated and much of the curriculum lacking relevance to their personal lives. Additionally problematic, however, is that the academic expectations in many classrooms are far below what these students are capable of knowing and achieving. Many are graduating with a limited understanding of content and with minimal skills for emotional control, reasoned decision making, meaningful collaboration, moral judgment, and independent learning management (Gardner 1999; Wiggins & McTighe 1998; Resnick 1999).

Increasingly, teachers have assumed the role of social and emotional mentor. They realize that for adolescents to think and learn well, closer attention must be paid to personal needs. Sagor wrote that "[i]nstilling positive feelings in students will not result from pep talks or positive self-image assemblies but from planned educational experiences" (1996, 39). He differentiated between students with resilience and those likely to fail by their feelings of competence, belonging, usefulness, potency, and optimism. These can be engendered in the classroom through experiences that

- provide students with genuine evidence of personal academic success (competence);
- show them that they are members of a community (belonging);
- reinforce feelings that they have made a significant contribution (usefulness); and
- help students feel empowered (potency).

Research-based learning experiences that promote adolescent competence, belonging, usefulness, and empowerment include service learning, authentic assessment, portfolios, student-led conferences, goal setting, cooperative learning, teacher advisory groups, and teaching with various learning styles and strengths in mind (Sagor 1999).

Strong, Silver, and Robinson identified four motivational goals that drive students' willingness to get involved and to persist in learning experiences (1995). Each goal satisfies an underlying human need that, when satisfied, enables one to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of life. These include the 1) success, or need for mastery; 2) curiosity, or the need for understanding; 3) originality, or the need for self-expression; and 4) relationship, or the need for involvement with others in a social context.

While classrooms must be physically safe, adolescents additionally need a *psychologically* safe environment for learning (Beamon 1997, Kessler 2000). In classrooms characterized by relationship-building, positive interaction, and trust, adolescents can develop social and emotionally. Experiences that help teach tolerance, empathy, civility, and moral development include perspective-taking, debate, role playing, decision-making, discussion, and civic action projects. Personal reflection can be encouraged through journal writing. A sense of community can be built through collaborative inquiry and technology-based projects that enable adolescents to connect with the world of experience beyond the immediate classroom (Bransford, Brown & Cocking 1999.)

The current ideas for fostering social and emotional support for adolescent learning can be grouped by several broad areas. Supported by research, including the work of Diamond and Hopson (1998), Jensen (1998), Goleman (1995), Wolfe and Brandt (1998), these areas are briefly explained below. Supporting instructional strategies can be seen in Figure 1.

***Personalize Learning Opportunities***

Adolescents need to learn and show learning in multiple ways, have choices and opportunity for input, or be encouraged to express talents and pursue areas of interest.

- Students might choose the format for book reports. Selections could include dramatic skits, booktalks, poetry, and musical composition.
- Students in art class might choose an artist of interest to research and emulate artistic style for a culminating project (Beamon 2000).

***Build Relationship***

Authentic learning experiences that require cooperation, inquiry, collaboration and consensus building enable adolescents to make connections and feel sense of community.

- Students assisted in the local humane society's effort to take care of orphaned animals. They washed them, built shelters, and assisted in placing them in adoptive homes (Beamon, 2000).
- Students can be paired with mentors at the local university for problem-based research.
- Students in a health class collaborated to develop a peer survey to find out reasons for teen smoking. They designed a marketable plan for an anti-smoking ad campaign
- In another class "ground rules" for debate and seminar are
    - Listen to others' perspectives.
    - Present your views with clarity.
    - Support your ideas with reasoning.

***Promote Inner Management***

Adolescents need opportunities to think about and take responsibility for personal viewpoints, decisions and actions. Grappling with the perspectives of others, talking through

conflict, and reflecting on their own learning and progress can help them to develop a more integrated sense of self. These examples illustrate:

- Students and teachers in a math class at times switch places. The student demonstrates a problem on the chalkboard while the teacher sits in a classroom desk, models question posing, and takes notes in a learning log (Schneider 1996).
- Students follow the StePs model (Structured Team Problem Solving) during class meetings to negotiate conflict, such as how to deal with cliques, stealing or cheating. Led by a classmate, they brainstorm ideas for solutions, cluster and clarify them, and create graphic visuals to show their thoughts (Schneider 1996).
- Students keep portfolios and assume responsibility for leading parent conferences.
- Students learned to balance between "outersense" (the way then interact with others) and "innersense" (their individuality) through journaling, seminars, conferences, and personal style questionnaires (Shelton 1999).
- Students selected, discussed, wrote about and role-played three traits that they hoped others would use to describe them. They were given a list that included such descriptors as tolerant, trustworthy, problem-solving, diligent, kind, courageous and resourceful. Whenever incongruent behavior occurred, they had to explain their actions (Fleming 1996).

***Create Emotional Security***

A climate of caring, respect and acceptance is important in positive social-emotional development. Stress caused by exclusiveness should be eliminated and high expectations should be apparent for all.

- Students crafted a class constitution with expectations such as listening to each other's ideas, treating with fairness, speaking and acting in non-embarrassing ways, and maintaining orderly personal habits. Non-punitive consequences were verbal and written reminders, a class meeting, and a meeting with parents or the principal (Fleming 1996).
- Students generated ideas for a weekly 20-minute seminar. Topic included dealing with conflict at home, peer pressure, social relationships, death, and school violence (Beamon, 2000.)
- Students in one class filled out an evaluation form on the teacher. Questions included, *Do I treat students with respect? Am I sensitive to students' needs? Do students feel comfortable asking questions? Are students actively interested in class work? Is enough time given for task?* (Belton 1996).

***Teach Well***

Relevant, meaningful and broadly interactive learning experiences that stimulate curiosity, challenge thinking, and promote understanding help adolescents to develop intellectually, personally and socially. Active learning that engages, intrigues and inspires also motivates adolescent learners (Beamon 2000). These problem-based scenarios illustrate:

- The loss of communication with the Mars Polar Lander has prompted NASA to assemble a team of scientists to investigate the possibility of another launching. Your mission…
- A famous scientist was unexpectedly killed by a van as he crossed the street to deliver his findings at an international meeting. Only a few papers were retrieved…

Parker Palmer used the words "creative tension" to describe the atmosphere of a classroom when skillful teachers purposefully shape a space for learning. In paradoxical language, he noted the need for both openness and boundary, as students speak and explore, teachers guide, and resources compel. He indicated that the space for learning should be both hospitable and "charged," a place "safe" for ideas, yet expectant of a deep level of exchange. This space should encourage students to *voice their individuality*, yet learn, under the teacher's guidance, to be open to the voice of the group. Within this space for learning, the teacher should connect the inner stories of the student with the bigger stories of the discipline a students seek greater understanding. The space should also allow time for both inner reflection and outward interchange, as resources are and personal understanding is achieved (1998, 74-77).

A space for adolescent learning requires this same kind of preparation. Their emotions must be intentionally engaged, their intellects meaningfully challenged, and their relationships built within a respectful, interactive, and authentic context. Conversely, under negatively charged conditions or in the absence of relevance, stimulation, interchange, or resource, adolescent learning and thinking are physiologically, psychologically, and physically short-changed. A skilled and caring teacher acknowledges and accommodates the interacting affective, cognitive, and social factors that affect adolescent learning and thinking development and makes instructional decisions accordingly. In this context adolescents can acquire a mindset for good thinking practice, become responsible and self-motivated learners, and develop the intellectual and personal skills needed to manage in a complex society.

Sizer eloquently expressed that the "dance of youth is timeless and beautiful in its awkwardness" (1996, 147). Adolescents desire to understand and to grow as human beings. This personal path is not an easy one, and they need guidance, encouragement and the

expectation to stay the course. Teachers can create "safe" space for adolescent learning by personalizing opportunities, building relationships, promoting inner management, creating emotional security, and teaching well. Socially relevant, personally meaningful, and cognitively challenging experiences engender efficacy and ethical responsibility. Within this "safe" environment adolescents can grow creatively and positively in both mind and spirit. The importance of this development carries long-term implication for the culture and broader society.

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**Figure 1**
**Building Social-Emotional Support for Adolescent Learning**

**1. Personalize Learning Opportunities.**

_____Differentiate curriculum for varying abilities and interests.
_____Permit choice on topics, projects and resources.
_____Assess understanding through multiple avenues.
_____Design authentic and developmentally challenging experiences.
_____Allow for creativity and originality.
_____Integrate music, art, and drama to promote individual expression.
_____Give adolescents opportunities to "shine."

**2. Build Relationship.**

_____Provide opportunities for peer interaction.
_____Structure collaborative tasks and monitor group dymamics.
_____ Teach interpersonal skills (e.g. team and consensus building).
_____Provide opportunity for community connections and social action.
_____Involve families.

**3. Promote Inner Management.**

_____Build in metacognitive time (e.g. reflection, discussion, response writing, self-evaluation).
_____Foster empathy (e.g. perspective-taking, debate, role playing).
_____Encourage moral development (e.g. decision-making, discussion, inquiry projects)
_____Treat mistakes as learning experiences and emphasize personal progress.
_____Provide opportunities for learning responsibility and ownership.
_____Involve in classroom management planning and conflict negotiation.
_____Downplay extrinsic motivation and promote the value of learning.

**4. Create Emotional Security.**

_____Promote a climate of caring, respect, inclusiveness, and acceptance.
_____Create an atmosphere of expectancy, challenge and limited stress.
_____Listen to and help them believe in the power of their ideas.
_____Encourage efforts to understand and to be understood.
_____Celebrate classroom cultures and discourage prejudice.
_____Incorporate humor and playfulness.

**5. Teach Well.**

_____Capture curiosity through a challenging curriculum (e.g. concepts, issues, problems)
_____Help adolescents to see the practicality of what they are learning.
_____Expect adolescents to be active participants, not passive listeners.
_____Foster thoughtful learning and understanding.
_____Expand the "walls" of the classroom through technology and external resources.

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